

Social media

Giving a voice to the voiceless

By Lauren Bowen

A cartoon Mark Horvath walks onto the screen wearing jeans and a brown sports coat. He addresses the camera calmly and introduces himself; he's the man most people know primarily as @hardlynorma on Twitter. What they may not know is that he was once homeless.

"Trust me," the animated Horvath laughs as a three-dimensional globe materialises above him and begins to spin, "at first, I thought Twitter was dumb, but social media has transformed my life." And he knows that it will help many other lives as well, which is why he created the site where this introductory video can be found: www.wearevisible.com, a social media literacy site that focuses on the homeless.

Although based in the United States, where

Horvath

lives and works, the website acts as an instructional resource for anyone who wants to learn the increasingly powerful tools of email, blogging, accessing widespread communities, and yes, even Tweeting.

For those accustomed to using the internet, it's easy to take having a world of information at your fingertips for granted. Horvath, however, sees the potential of this phenomenon as a vehicle for powerful social change.

His We Are Visible site is, most importantly, a way to give a voice to the so-often voiceless. For Horvath this hits especially close to home. "At my first homeless shelter, they sent us out for labour trafficking. You know, feed a bum all day, you can work 'em. We all screamed loud, but nobody

listened. That was 15 years ago."

Just this past April, women at Washington DC's Family Emergency Shelter were victims of the sexual misconduct of employees of the shelter. It is hard to imagine how powerless those women felt when they were made victims in the only place where they could find food and shelter. Horvath asks, "What if they had the power to scream about it? What if they had the power that we all take for granted? That's social media."

Mobilising a borderless community

Aside from heading off injustice and crime, social media can be used to mobilise communities faster and more effectively than ever before.

Horvath has experienced the benefits firsthand. A homeless man he was helping get back into the job market got mugged on his way to an interview. The man was stuck in a strange city in the middle of a brutal winter not knowing another soul, and all the shelters were full.

"I felt powerless and I didn't know what to do, so I went to Twitter. Someone from Twitter actually went over and gave him a hundred bucks. Somebody I didn't even know."

To Horvath, this story is not unique.

More and more people are using the perpetual conversation of the world wide web to reach out, making it easier to match cases of need with the resources that can help. This is what Horvath refers to as "virtual

@hardlynorma

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— Debbie Lightbody

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case management" and he cites it as one of the primary goals of the website.

The Big Issue South Africa also experienced the power of social media recently when one of its vendors, Florence Godongwana, was drenched with water by a group of young guys while selling the magazine. The incident was witnessed and posted on Twitter. It went viral at supersonic speed and, thanks to the massive response from the borderless online community and the subsequent media attention, the group of youths stepped forward and apologised to Godongwana.

SA's homeless get connected

According to Horvath, "These days you need an email address for everything. You can't apply for a job without the internet."

So how can homeless people access websites like Twitter, Gmail, Facebook and Wordpress?

In South Africa, the majority of homeless shelters don't have computer stations with internet access, but a brief survey of shelters in Cape Town showed that street people mostly access the internet from public libraries.

"The library offers one free hour of internet use, and there are plenty of homeless people that do use the internet," confirms Onismus Napo from Cape Town Central Library.

And, while the homeless in South Africa are not yet using social media to report on social injustices like their counterparts in the US, they are using the internet to look for work and as a social support structure.

Steyn Rudolph, an operations manager at Cape Town's OPHELP, a division of NGO Straatwerk which assists street people through work programmes, says most people in the programme use Facebook regularly.

"When you're homeless, the library [with free internet access] is like your centre of operations," he says, adding that most of the street people in the OPHELP programme prefer to use Facebook to keep in contact with family and friends.

Amioen Taliona, a Malawian who was

homeless for a year when he first arrived in Cape Town in search of work, says he used Facebook not only to stay in contact with those back home, but also as a peer-to-peer support system with other homeless and socially marginalised people. "Facebook is supportive and a good place to share ideas," he says.

"It's also a good distraction because when there is nothing to do, instead of drinking or smoking, you can go on to Facebook," adds Taliona.

For homeless people like Debbie Lightbody, a resident at the Loaves and Fishes shelter in Observatory, the internet is a crucial part of a much-needed support structure because sites like Facebook and Twitter can be an instant equaliser. Whereas a homeless person is often ignored, judged or even feared on the streets, online they are an avatar, just like everyone else, and it can be easier to be heard and connect — or re-connect — with people. Online, they have a voice.

"Facebook is one place where I can post how I'm feeling and the problems I'm facing, and I won't get ignored. Friends and family from all over the world [including her two adult children] will offer encouragement and comforting words," she explains.

Lightbody, who was a legal secretary before drug addiction caused her to lose her job and home, also uses the internet to look for work. She's proactive and regularly posts her skills on free listings site Gumtree and on Facebook. So far she's had no luck, but is still hopeful that the powerful networking capabilities of the internet will yield results. "You never know, someone I knew from school might be an attorney now and may know of some work for me."

Effect social change, log on

For homeless people unfamiliar with the internet and social networking, Horvath's We Are Visible website offers the perfect starting point, no matter what country you're in.

Once online, the person need only type www.wearevisible.org into the address bar, and We Are Visible's instructional videos will walk them through all the necessary steps to set up various accounts.

The site is not only designed for people seeking help, it's also intended for those establishments that provide help and for "people who have a heart and want to care, join, watch, listen and get involved," says Horvath.

Horvath's long-term goals for the site are

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simple: www.wearevisible.com will grow and evolve depending on the ways people use it. It may eventually have more tutorials, things like "How to Build a CV", etc. It may become more of its own community to foster conversation and social progress.

In the meantime, Horvath invites all people — that means you too — to log on and just say, "How are you? How's your day going?". He encourages everyone to use the internet to help bridge the gap of alienation that the homeless feel as they are passed by on the streets without so much as a glance or a hello.

Help effect positive social change. Log on and make the homeless visible. 

— ©Spare Change, USA with additional reporting by Leanne Farish and Ryan van der Speck, *The Big Issue* South Africa